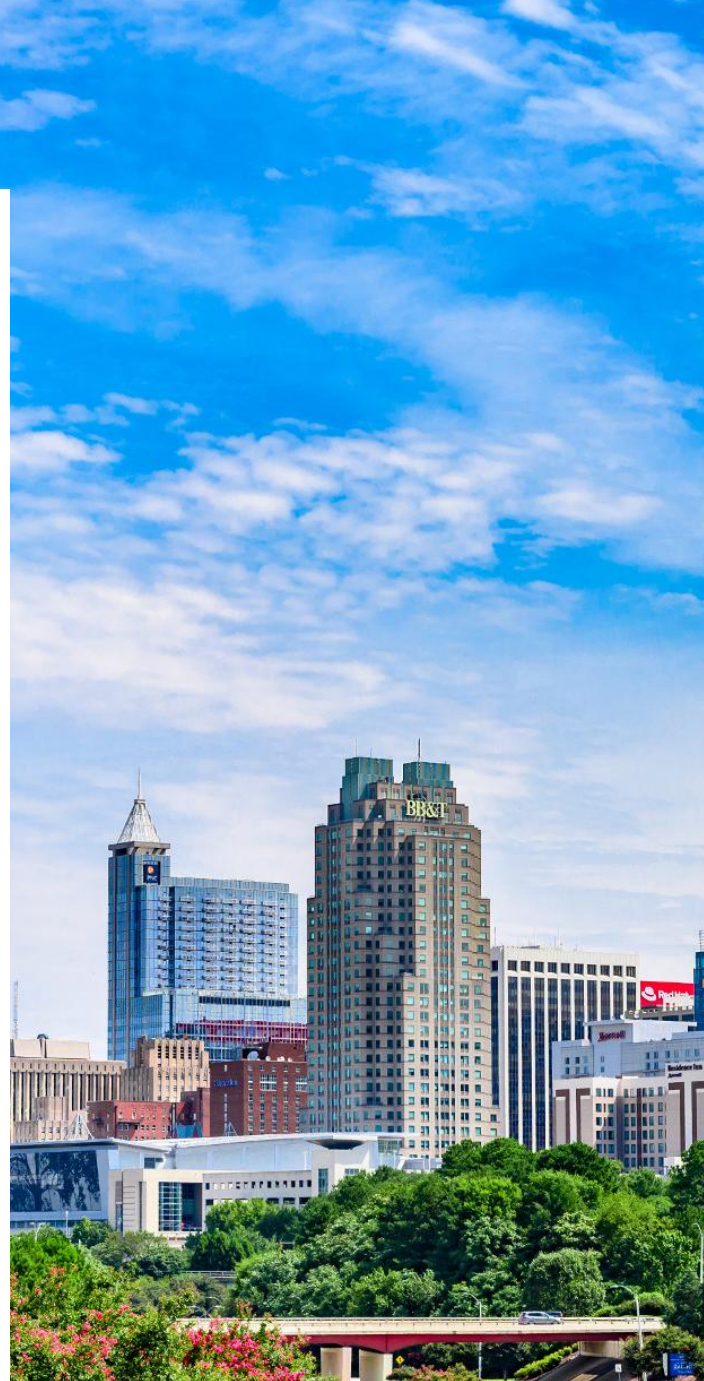




Raleigh Design Review Commission

2025 Annual Report and FY2027 Work Plan

The Raleigh Design Review Commission is pleased to present its 2025 Annual Report and FY2027 Work Program.



ON-GOING SERVICE

The North Carolina General Statutes [§160D-960] call on Appearance Commissions “to provide leadership and guidance in matters of area or community design and appearance to individuals, and to public and private organizations, and agencies.” In the coming year, Raleigh’s Design Review Commission, formerly the City of Raleigh Appearance Commission, seeks to continue to serve in that capacity. We assess architectural and site design issues as they relate to our urban fabric, built form, contextual design, pedestrian safety, and the quality of experience. We appreciate and support the City’s proactive approach to advance and improve development codes, street cross-sections, and continually challenge the status quo to make our standards better.

The City of Raleigh and the Triangle area continue to experience growth at a rapid pace. The Design Review Commission is here to support the City as it continues to navigate the challenges that accompany growth and to help in the pursuit of a world-class quality of life and inspired future. The Design Review Commission applauds the City’s efforts to increase access to opportunities for residents through the implementation of multimodal transportation opportunities, public arts projects, and planting efforts, and continues to encourage these types of programs in the City.

Stormie Forte, as City Council liaison to the Commission, has continued to give our Commission personal attention through attendance at our events, quarterly conference calls with our Chair and Vice Chair. We appreciate her involvement and continued support.

We would also like to express our gratitude to City staff, including: Design Review Commission staff liaison and Planning Supervisor, Kasey Evans; Land Development Manager Keegan McDonald; the City Attorney’s Office; Transportation Staff; and the entire Planning and Development team for the outstanding service they provide to our Commission and City. We believe that we have a special group with a true dedication to make Raleigh a world-class city. We look forward to serving the City Council in the coming year.

Thank you,

Members of the Design Review Commission



Kyle Springer, AIA – Chair

DESIGN REVIEW COMMISSION ACTIVITY

Summary

As the City of Raleigh enters its 13th year of regulating local development policy under the Unified Development Ordinance (UDO), the Design Review Commission continues to ensure we maintain a high quality of life by providing guidance, advice, and recommendations regarding the visual quality and aesthetic characteristics of the City. The Commission provides valuable service by elevating project design through Design Alternate, Streetscape Plan, and Custom Signage Plan review, improving City projects through charette-style discourse, spotlighting innovative and model design work through the Sir Walter Raleigh Awards, and supporting design in the public realm through the Design Impact Grant (formerly known as Legacy Projects).

The Design Review Commission further settled into its role reviewing Design Alternates via a quasi-judicial process. We continue to hear positive feedback from our applicants, City staff, and City residents calling attention to the rigor, care, and professionalism of our members. In 2025, the Commission also continued its Legacy Project work, renaming it Design Impact Grant (DIG) and updating the application process.

Text change TC-6-23, adopted in 2024, designates the Design Review Commission as the advisory review body for adopting and amending streetscape plans. The Commission anticipates reviewing its first streetscape plan request in 2026.

Design review is a critically important part of the development and growth of a city. As Raleigh grows, it is vitally important to ensure our downtown, parks, public spaces, and corridors are thoughtfully designed. With the rich and varied design expertise represented in the members, the Design Review Commission should be used as a resource for advancing the design discussion in Raleigh. The Commission is ready to serve and asks for the City's support in its efforts to advocate for design that makes our City a beautiful, vibrant, and resilient place to be.

The following sections provide an overview of the Commission's efforts and activities during 2025 and act as a framework for the organization of this report:

- I. Design Review Performance**
- II. Design Outreach and Education**
- III. Observed Trends and Issues**
- IV. Work Program**

2025 Annual Report

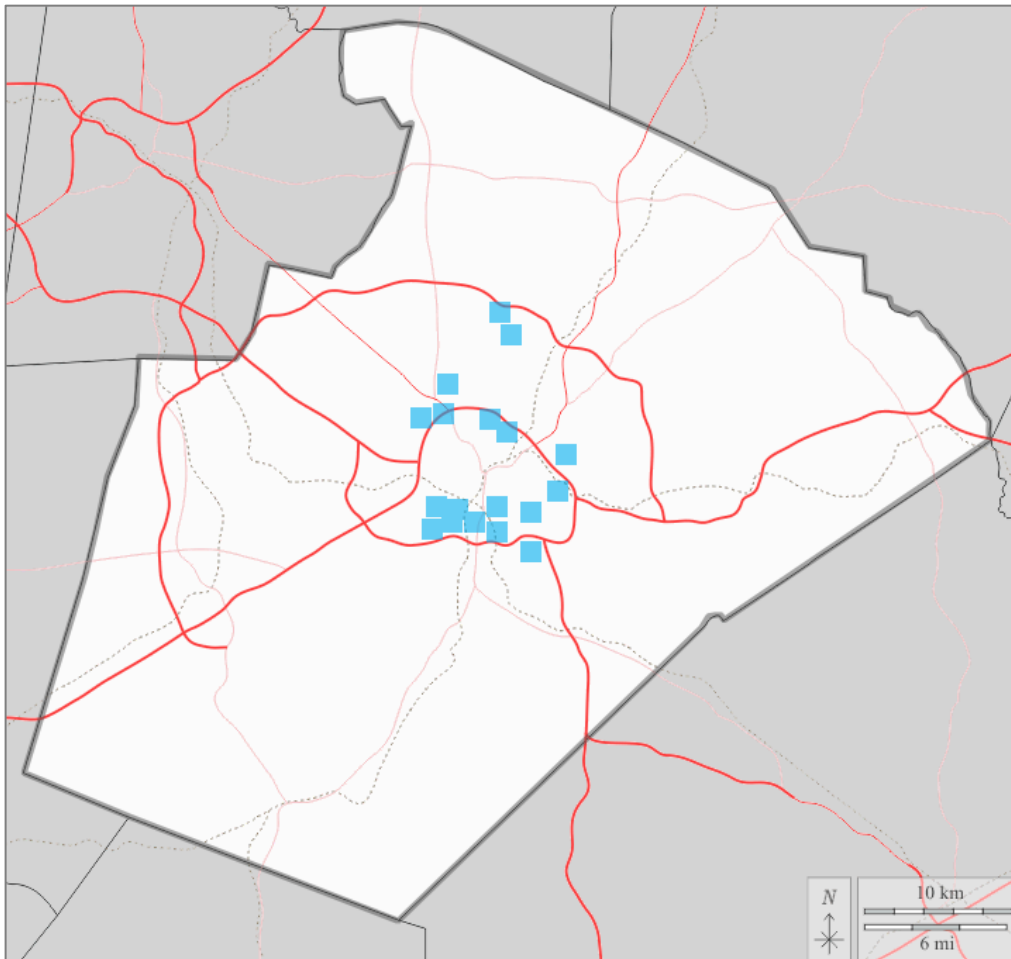
I. DESIGN REVIEW PERFORMANCE

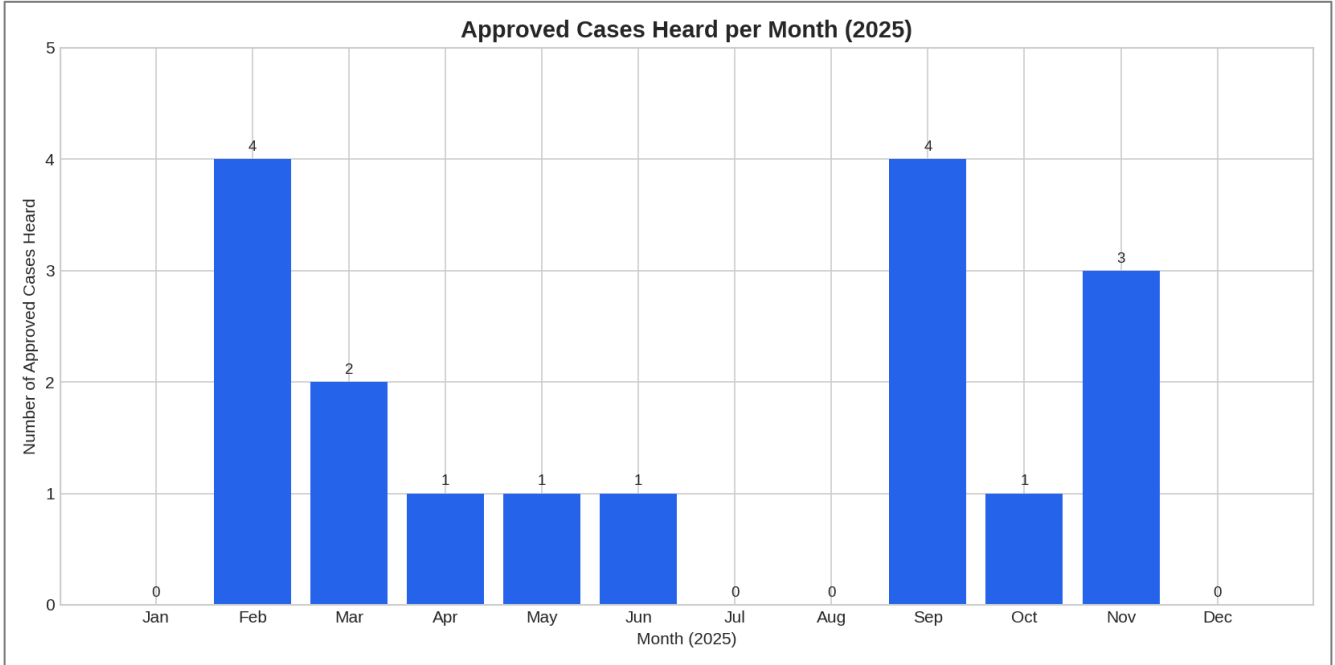
Among the Commission’s chief functions is the review of Design Alternate requests. Additionally, the Commission provides evaluation and input regarding design components of public projects, and area and corridor plans as requested.

Design Alternates (DA)

During 2025 the Commission heard 18 Design Alternate cases. Those 18 cases comprised a total of 80 individual design alternate requests. The median number of design alternate requests per case was 2.5.

Geographic Distribution of Cases in 2025





II. DESIGN OUTREACH AND EDUCATION

The Design Review Commission actively pursues public awareness and education initiatives on a variety of fronts, focusing on design, livability, and awareness of appearance in Raleigh. The Sir Walter Raleigh Awards are one key opportunity for the Commission to highlight the positive effects great design can have on our community while featuring the work of both talented design professionals and the innovation and wisdom of the organizations investing in our collective future.

2025 Sir Walter Raleigh Awards

The 2025 Sir Walter Raleigh Awards were held on Wednesday September 17, 2025 at The Chapel at Dix Park and again celebrated projects of exceptional merit that elevate Raleigh’s built environment and reflect the city’s continued growth and stewardship. The event was attended by Councilmember Forte, members of the Design Community, as well as City staff. Music was provided by Root Down Collective.

Thirteen awards were presented to a range of Raleigh projects, reflecting the best in commercial, residential, and institutional design, as well as historic rehabilitation, public spaces, and community impact.

Sir Walter Raleigh Awards Certificate

The Commission again sponsored a design competition for the design of the award certificate. While offering artists an opportunity to tell meaningful stories of Raleigh through their art, these custom designed certificates have come to be beloved by recipients; one they proudly display as commemoration in their offices and homes. The 2025 certificate design competition winner was Allison Holbrooksy. In addition to the certificates, the artist created stickers that were distributed at the event as mementos for attendees.



In the Commercial category, 1000 Social at The Exchange Raleigh and The Bend Bar demonstrate the range of scale in which developers further promote a vibrant Raleigh identity through both contemporary design and adaptive reuse, reinforcing Midtown’s evolving identity while preserving the character and scale of downtown neighborhoods.

Commercial Award Winner – 1000 Social at The Exchange Raleigh

Dewitt Carolinas Inc, Rule Joy Trammell + Rubio LLC, Uzon+Case, Crenshaw Consulting Engineers, Brasfield & Gorrie, ACORE Capital



Commercial Award Winner – The Bend

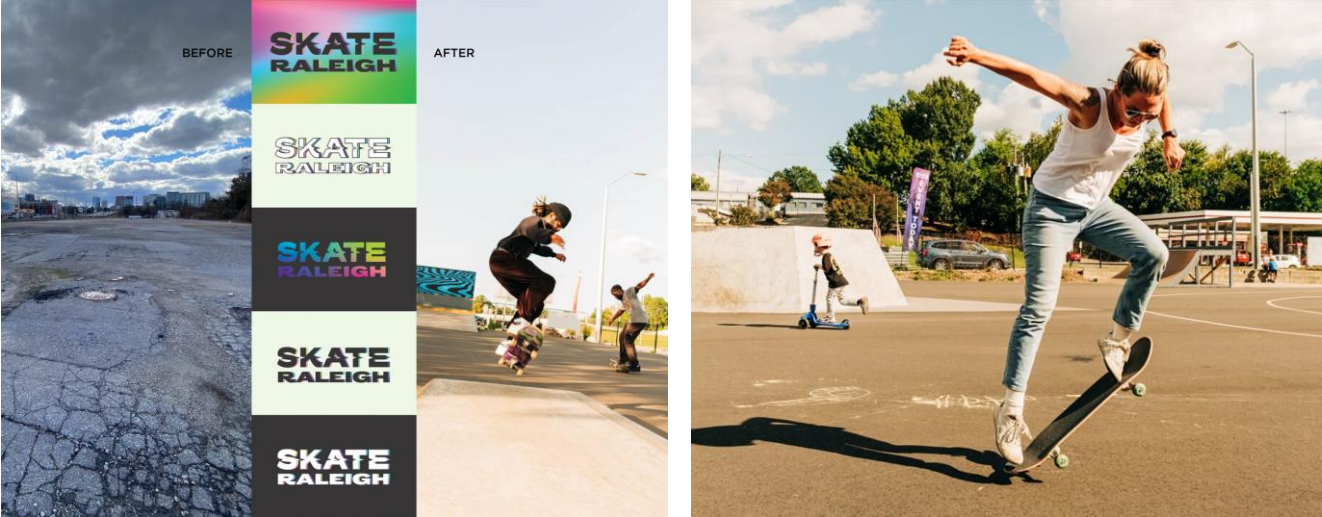
Carpenter Development, Maurer Architecture, Muter Construction



Community-centered design is evident in Conlon Family Skatepark and SAFEchild Children’s Advocacy Center, which expand access to inclusive, welcoming spaces that enrich quality of life.

Community Impact Winner – Conlon Family Skate Park

Skate Raleigh, Redesign.build, City of Raleigh, Newline Skate Parks, Ed Marsden



Community Impact Winner – SAFEchild Children’s Advocacy Center

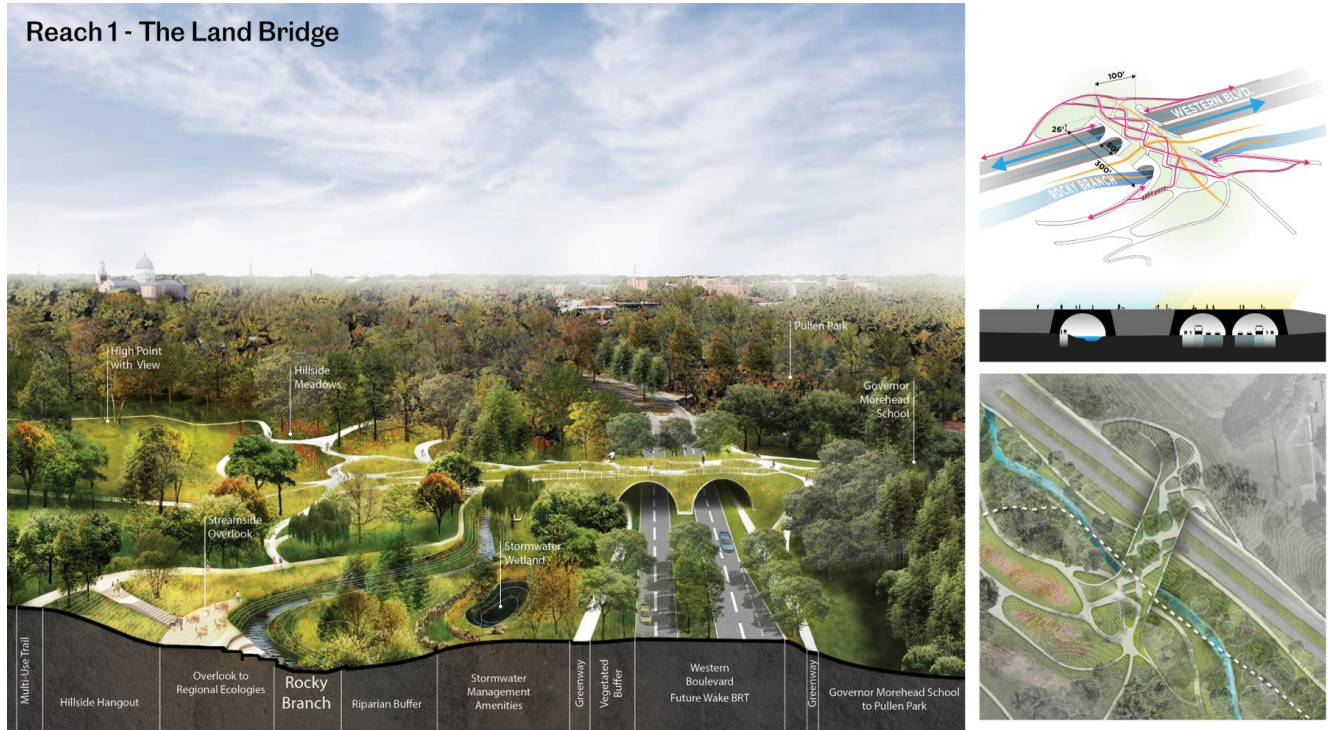
SAFEchild, Gensler, Williams Realty & Building Company



Environmental leadership defines the new Master Plan category, with the Rocky Branch Enhancement Project and River Cane Wetland Park advancing the connectivity of residents to our natural waterways and woodland settings, ecological restoration, and long-term sustainability.

Master Plan Category Winner – Rocky Branch Enhancement Project

City of Raleigh, Surface 678, Wildlands Engineering, Geosyntec, AECOM



Master Plan Category Winner – River Cane Wetland Park

City of Raleigh, WithersRavenel



From the playful landscape of The Marbles Playway to the historic rehabilitation of the Dorothea Dix Stone Houses, and thoughtfully designed housing at Milner Commons, this year’s honorees demonstrate how design excellence strengthens Raleigh architecturally, urbanistically, and environmentally.

Landscape Design Winner – Marbles Playway

Marbles Kids Museum, Wake County, McAdams, Clearscapes, Barhill Contracting



Public Spaces Design Winner – Baileywick Park Multi-Purpose Pavilion

City of Raleigh, in situ studio, Site Collaborative, Lysaght & Associates, Muter Construction LLC



Rehabilitation / Historic Preservation Winner – Dix Stone Houses

Dix Park Conservancy, Maurer Architecture, Stuart Engineering, The Northgate Group, State Employees Credit Union Foundation



Iconic Installations Category – Sunflower Power Poles

Dix Park Conservancy, City of Raleigh, Thomas Sayre, Duke Energy



Educational Winner – Global Courtyard

North Carolina State University, NC State Department of Landscape Architecture LAR 503: Design Development Studio, DJF Contracting Inc, NCSU Office of Global Engagement



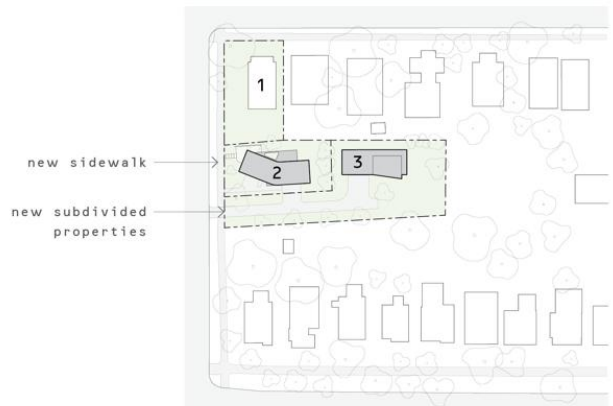
Residential Winner – Milner Commons

DHIC, Cline Design, Kimley Horn, Lighthouse Engineering, NV5, Blum Construction, Banc of California



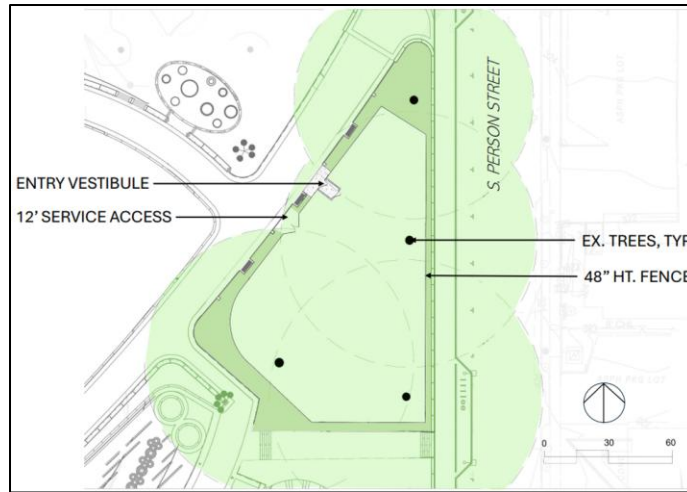
Residential Winner – Jones Street Residences

The Raleigh Architecture Company, Lysaght & Associates, Claire Craven Studio



Legacy Projects

In 2025, the Commission continued its Legacy Project work, supporting a City of Raleigh initiative to redevelop a beloved community dog park at Moore Square.



Design Impact Grants

The City of Raleigh’s Design Review Commission helps guide how the community looks and grows. They work with people, businesses, and organizations to support good design across the city. Their main goal is to make public spaces welcoming and useful for everyone in Raleigh by encouraging high-quality, long-lasting, and sustainable design.

To support this goal, in 2025 the Commission revamped the Legacy Project into the Design Impact Grant (DIG). The Commission worked diligently to create a new submittal process and page on the City website, making the funding opportunities more accessible for potential applicants. Like the former Legacy Projects, this grant helps pay for projects that improve public spaces and design in Raleigh. DIG projects might include research, creative programs, or upgrades to buildings and outdoor areas. The amount of money available each year may change, but past grants have generally been between \$1,000 and \$10,000.

The DIG timeline for FY26 is as follows:

February 2026	Launch new DIG webpage and open call for applications
March 2026	Review applications and select finalists
April 2026	Finalist presentations and evaluation
April – May 2026	Awardee selection
June – December 2026	Funding paperwork completed, project executed in established timeline, and funds dispersed

III. OBSERVED TRENDS AND ISSUES

In providing professional guidance for proposed development, the Design Review Commission continues to observe recurring patterns in the types of Design Alternate cases brought before the Commission. The cases heard during 2025 highlight several design and regulatory issues that appear consistently across projects and across different areas of the city.

Trends

As Raleigh continues to experience rapid growth and redevelopment, Design Alternates often arise where development standards intersect with constrained sites, specialized building types, or complex development frameworks. Through its review of these cases, the Commission is able to identify patterns that may indicate opportunities to refine development standards or improve development review processes.

The Commission observed several key trends during the 2025 review year:

- Street cross-section standards frequently require modification on constrained urban sites.
- Transparency requirements continue to create challenges for certain building types.
- Vehicular access standards often conflict with redevelopment of smaller or irregular parcels.
- Specialized building uses can present design challenges under standards written primarily for mixed-use development.
- Development within multi-parcel districts can create conflicts with standards written for individual parcels.
- The quasi-judicial structure of the Design Alternate process limits opportunities for early design discussion.

These trends reflect both the complexity of redevelopment in a rapidly growing city and the importance of design review as a tool for balancing regulatory requirements with thoughtful site and building design.

Street Cross-Section Standards and Constrained Urban Sites

Several Design Alternate cases heard during 2025 involved requests related to street cross-section requirements. These requests typically arise where redevelopment occurs along corridors with limited right-of-way or where existing site conditions constrain the ability to meet the full dimensional requirements of the UDO street sections.

As redevelopment occurs along older corridors and urban infill sites, applicants often encounter conflicts between required streetscape dimensions, building placement, and existing infrastructure such as utilities or established building patterns. In these situations, strict compliance with the prescribed cross-sections may not always be feasible without significantly impacting site design. One

example of this condition occurred in case DA-07-2025 (101 Enterprise Street and 2204 Garden Place), where the applicant sought relief related to street design requirements along a constrained urban corridor.

The Commission recognizes the importance of consistent street design standards in supporting pedestrian safety and multimodal transportation. However, the repeated need for adjustments may indicate an opportunity to evaluate whether additional flexibility or context-sensitive cross-section standards may be appropriate in certain redevelopment contexts.

Commission's recommendation: Evaluate whether additional context-sensitive street cross-section options could be considered for constrained urban corridors or redevelopment sites.

Transparency Requirement for Certain Building Types

Transparency requirements continue to generate Design Alternate requests across a variety of building types. While transparency plays an important role in creating engaging streetscapes and supporting pedestrian-oriented environments, certain uses face operational challenges in meeting the required glazing percentages. In some cases, building operations require greater wall area or reduced visibility for security or operational purposes. In other cases, glazing systems designed for energy performance can affect how transparency is measured under current ordinance standards.

An example of this issue occurred in case DA-12-2025 (10856 Globe Road), where the applicant sought an alternate related to transparency while proposing additional architectural articulation and landscape elements to address the intent of the ordinance. This issue has appeared in previous years as well, where the Commission reviewed multiple projects seeking partial relief from transparency requirements due to building operations or design considerations.

Commission's recommendation: Consider evaluating whether transparency standards could incorporate additional flexibility for certain building types or frontage conditions while maintaining the ordinance's intent of creating visually engaging streetscapes.

Vehicular Access and Circulation on Redevelopment Sites

A number of Design Alternate cases involved requests related to vehicular access, driveway spacing, and circulation standards. These requests frequently occur when development is proposed on parcels that were originally designed under earlier development patterns or that contain irregular lot configurations. Redevelopment sites along established corridors often face difficulty meeting modern access management standards due to limited parcel frontage, proximity to intersections, or the presence of existing development patterns. One example occurred in case DA-11-2024 (W South Street), where the applicant sought modifications to access configuration due to the physical constraints of the site and surrounding roadway conditions.

The Commission recognizes the importance of access management standards in improving traffic safety and corridor functionality, but notes that redevelopment of constrained parcels may require careful balancing of these standards with practical site design considerations.

Commission's recommendation: Continue evaluating how access standards are applied to redevelopment sites where existing parcel configurations limit compliance with current spacing requirements.

Specialized Building Uses and Urban Design Expectations

The Commission observed a recurring pattern of Design Alternate requests associated with specialized building types that do not always align easily with urban design standards intended for mixed-use or pedestrian-oriented environments. Uses such as self-storage facilities, data storage facilities, and certain service-oriented commercial uses may require reduced transparency, larger blank wall areas, or operational configurations that conflict with typical urban design expectations. One example of this condition occurred in case DA-12-2024 (6305 Falls of the Neuse Road), where the proposed use required design alternates related to façade design and building transparency.

In these cases, applicants often propose alternative design strategies such as enhanced landscaping, façade articulation, or material variation to address the intent of the ordinance while accommodating operational needs.

Commission's recommendation: Consider evaluating whether additional use-specific design guidance may be appropriate for building types that regularly require Design Alternates.

Development with Multi-Parcel and Phased Projects

Several cases reviewed during 2025 involved sites located within larger multi-parcel or multi-phase developments. In these situations, the design of individual parcels is often influenced by a broader development framework, shared infrastructure, or a master plan that coordinates development across multiple properties.

While these coordinated development patterns can support cohesive urban design outcomes, they can also result in situations where individual parcels encounter conflicts with standards originally written for stand-alone development sites. One example occurred in case DA-03-2025 (5101 Forestville Road), where the design of the individual parcel reflected the broader development framework of the surrounding district. As Raleigh continues to develop larger mixed-use districts and master-planned areas, the Commission expects this development pattern to become more common.

Commission’s recommendation: Continue evaluating how development standards may be interpreted or applied in the context of coordinated multi-parcel development frameworks.

Opportunities for Early Design Discussion within the Development Review Process

The Commission also observed that the current quasi-judicial structure of Design Alternate review can limit opportunities for early discussion of design challenges between applicants and the Commission. Under the current process, Design Alternates are reviewed through a formal quasi-judicial hearing. While this structure ensures fairness and consistency in decision-making, it limits the ability of Commissioners to discuss projects prior to the formal hearing. As a result, applicants often cannot receive design feedback from the Commission until projects are already significantly developed.

In contrast, many design review processes in other jurisdictions include opportunities for concept-level design discussion or advisory design review prior to formal decision-making. Because Design Alternate cases frequently involve interpretation of design standards, constrained site conditions, and balancing multiple urban design objectives, the inability to discuss potential solutions early in the design process can increase inefficiencies for both applicants and the City. One example of this dynamic occurred in case DA-13-2024 (205 W Lenoir Street), where design considerations evolved significantly during the formal review process.

The Commission also notes that Design Alternates differ from variances reviewed by the Board of Adjustment, which address hardship related to dimensional standards and are governed by a separate quasi-judicial process. Design Alternates reviewed by the Design Review Commission often involve architectural and urban design considerations that may benefit from collaborative discussion earlier in the design process.

Commission’s recommendation: Consider evaluating whether the Design Alternate process could incorporate opportunities for preliminary advisory design discussion prior to a formal quasi-judicial hearing. Allowing applicants to engage in early design dialogue could improve efficiency in the permitting process, reduce redesign later in project review, and support better design outcomes.

IV. FY2027 WORK PROGRAM

The Design Review Commission held its 2026 planning retreat on March 19, 2026 at the Crowder Woodland Center. During the meeting, the members discussed the Commission’s activities over the past year, current development trends, and upcoming work related to the Sir Walter Raleigh Awards and Legacy Projects which will help recognize and contribute to the City’s evolving placemaking initiatives.

Advise

The Commission will provide professional design assistance to stakeholders in the community in the following areas:

Streetscape Plan and Custom Signage Plan Review

Adopted in 2024 via text change TC-6-23, the Design Review Commission is newly designated as the advisory review body for adopting and amending streetscape plans and custom signage plans. In this capacity the Commission will review streetscape plan and custom signage plan requests and make advisory recommendations to City Council on those requests. The Commission anticipates reviewing its first streetscape plan request in 2026.

UDO Text Change Studies

The Commission will review the UDO and study the design outcomes under the Code to determine areas where text change could be beneficial to development.

Review and Participate in Area and Corridor Planning Efforts

The Commission seeks to be an advisory resource in the development and review of City area and corridor planning efforts.

Study of Development Trends

The Commission will study development trends and their impacts on the public realm to advise City Council and staff on how best to promote high-quality design.

Promote

Through its Design Advocacy function, the Commission will help promote, market, and celebrate good design within the community, using the following objectives:

Elevate the Design Conversation

The Commission will work to initiate greater dialogue on design excellence by leading community lectures, workshops, tours, round-table discussions, and community outreach projects.

Foster Partnerships and Collaborations

The Commission will continue to collaborate with City Council and other boards and commissions. At the 2025 Sir Walter Raleigh Awards, the Commission collaborated with the Raleigh Historic Development Commission to include a portion of the program where historic plaques were given out. This type of partnership will continue to be explored for future years.

Design Impact Grants

Building on its efforts in past years, the Commission's revamped Design Impact Grants (formerly known as Legacy Projects) will extend the reach of and more broadly distribute projects. The Commission will continue to seek out new partnerships to promote and advise innovative design across the City of Raleigh.

Celebrations

Sir Walter Raleigh Awards event planning and coordination has been updated over the past several years as the Commission has implemented a new vision for the awards, including new partnerships, new categories, and outreach to new audiences. This year the Commission will continue to celebrate design excellence while trying to expand the audience even further and incorporate the Design Impact Grant's placemaking efforts.

2025-2026

Design Review Commission Members

Megan Beach
Jonathan Best
Rachel Beaudoin
Kara Blue
Kate Charland
Claire Craven
Jason Dail

Brooke Funkhouser
Will Gaskins
Patrice Gilmore
Matthew Griffith
Adan Quesada
Chris Roberts
Cat Schmidt

Kyle Springer
Sravya Suryadevara
John Terzotis
Dave Toms
Chris Touchette
Adam Walters
Brian Williams



The Design Review Commission looks forward to providing continued professional service to the City of Raleigh in the coming year. The Commission stands ready to address any special tasks initiated by the City Council, along with performing the usual duties of design alternate review, engaging in community outreach, and pursuing other initiatives that promote design excellence. Please consider the Commission a resource as you are faced with important decisions about Raleigh’s future growth, character, and prosperity.



The Design Review Commission's goal is to encourage the use of the public realm by all of Raleigh's citizens through elevating design expectations for long-term, high quality, sustainable appearance. The Design Review Commission is honored to provide on-going service to the City of Raleigh, and looks forward to engaging with Council, city staff, and the public to continue to encourage and promote the highest design standards for development in the Capital City.